TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

# CounterPunch

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## Are Nepal's Maoists on Shining Path to Victory?

### By Peter Lee

The Motto of the the Nepalese political process could well be "Dysfunction by Design" .

Today, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) is poised to exploit this weakness and secure state power with the support or acquiescence of a significant fraction of Nepalese opinion.

Ever since Prithvi Narayan Shah, ruler of the Ghurkas, conquered the Kathmandu Valley in 1768, Nepal's leaders have sought survival in the disunion of their potential foes. It is easy to see why. The Himalayan foothills are a mélange of dozens of languages, nationalities and clans. The Ghurkas further sliced and diced the population by promoting a divisive, caste-intensive Hinduism on top of explicit discrimination by birthplace. By default, a narrow, inbred, and by and large unworthy elite in Kathmandu served as the focus of national loyalty.

Now the compromises, evasions and failures of Nepal's leaders are coming back to haunt the nation. Its monarchy collapsed in 2006, after 240 years in power; its politicians have lost the confidence of the people; and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has emerged as, apparently, the sole party with the will and means to hold the country together. The Nepal Maoists are in the midst of an escalating campaign of mass action, designed either to wring acknowledgement of their supremacy from the interim government … or set the stage for a return to insurgency.

Nepal's Maoists are not agrarian reformers, armchair revolutionaries, or student radicals. They are a party of experienced political and military leaders

**LEE** CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## *A Different Sort of Blowback*

## The Culture of Cocaine

### By Forrest Hylton

Cocaine is a central commodity of the neoliberal age; so, too, its reprocessed form ("crack") for the desperately poor in de-industrialized cities of the North and South Atlantic. First announced by Richard Nixon in 1971, the "War on Drugs" predates the rise of cocaine and crack by nearly a decade, but, in the 1980s and '90s, the "War on Drugs" was redoubled in response to the explosion of the cocaine business. It now ranks as the U.S.A.'s longest running military-police campaign. Thus, if we look at cocaine as a social hieroglyph – not as a thing but as a complex relation between networks and organizations of people, as well as between states and bureaucracies – we may glimpse some of the distinguishing features of the contemporary world.

There is a strong argument to be made for the impact of the cocaine business on architecture, urban design and construction, fashion, media entertainment, sports, and aesthetics, not to mention banking and credit institutions. The war on cocaine producers, sellers, and users has radically changed the shape of states in relation to those who are, at least nominally, rights-bearing citizens, as states have become more militarized, policed, punitive and carceral, and citizens more powerless and less protected by the rule of law. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed in his late work, states do not disappear under neoliberalism: rather, their repressive right wings are strengthened while their progressive, redistributive rights-based wings are weakened or eliminated. This is most notable in cities, where urban space has been re-made in line with the requirements of policing and surveillance to protect capital investment and affluent consumers.

Though it does not advance these arguments, except tangentially, Tom Feiling's well-researched *The Candy Machine: How Cocaine took over the World* (Penguin, 2009) makes a similar claim for the importance of its subject. Yet, could not the same be said of any essential commodity: oil, for instance, or cars or clothes? What makes cocaine different? The answer, of course, would depend on whom one asks, but what makes cocaine extraordinarily profitable for its import-export merchants is the fact that it is illegal. The fact that one country – Colombia – supplies 90 per cent of the cocaine consumed in the U.S. also makes the commodity different. Ninety per cent of Colombian cocaine enters the U.S.A. through Mexico (and Guatemala); smuggling having been made considerably easier by NAFTA, which de-regulated trucking and shipping.

Plan Colombia and Plan Mérida (Mexico) – based on counternarcotics and counterterrorism – are the two most important U.S. foreign policy initiatives in the Western Hemisphere, with Plan Colombia and its successors costing U.S. taxpayers $8 billion between 2000 and 2008, and Plan Mérida, approved in 2008, costing $500 million in 2009. So, cocaine is not only big business, it is also high politics: Plan Colombia has been held up as a model of counternarcotics and counterinsurgency success for Mexico, Afghanistan and Pakistan. One senior U.S. official told CBS News, "The more Afghanistan can look like Colombia, the better."

Public debate in the U.S. concerning the suppression of cocaine production and consumption – and the U.S. has determined international drug policy since the U.N. Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 – is moralistic, due to

**HYLTON** CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

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doing their clear-eyed best to avoid the weaknesses of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and give Communism its first victory after decades of rollback.

The opportunity is theirs to seize power because Nepal, while it escaped the first wave of decolonization and democratization after World War II, was belatedly overwhelmed by these forces in the last years of the twentieth century. The Nepalese government formed a close alliance with Great Britain. In 1857, Nepal sent troops to Lucknow to assist in the suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny. The British army was allowed to recruit its famous Ghurka regiments inside Nepal for service in the first and second world wars.

In return, the British gave Nepal full freedom in the ordering of its own affairs. The mountain kingdom, spared the demands and challenges of political liberalization demanded from within or imposed from outside, reformed tardily. Slavery was finally abolished in 1924 (though bonded labor remained).

Once India became independent, principle and calculation combined in a policy of simmering hostility toward the backward, pro-British regime by New Delhi. The Indian government supported insurrectionary efforts by pro-democracy Nepalese educated in Indian universities. In 1950, India connived in the flight of the king of Nepal to India in order to undercut the authority of the prime minister – held hereditarily by the Rana family and the true seat of power inside the government.

With the king's return and the reassertion of royal supremacy, reform limped on in the form of an ad hoc parliamentary democracy under an ostensibly liberal monarch. The governments of the postwar period were dogged by the ability of the king to short-circuit the political process by dissolving or suspending parliament. Very little got done, and discontent coalesced around a number of political parties – including the Communist Party of Nepal. The CPN derived encouragement from the Indian Communist Party – once seen as the vanguard of Third World Communism before it was overtaken by the Chinese Communist Party, and still a powerful and legitimate force in Indian politics – and participated in the Nepalese political process.

**The most useful lessons for Nepal's Maoists were probably extracted from the failure of the Peruvian Maoists, known as the "Shining Path."**

However in 1996, after multiple splits, a faction of the CPN opted out of the political process and began an insurrection in Nepal's impoverished west. The faction identified itself as Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and is led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal under his pseudonym, Prachanda. The chief theorist is Baburam Bhattarai. The faction identified itself as Maoist because, unsurprisingly, it accepted Mao Zedong's concept that a communist revolution could succeed in a largely agricultural Third World country.

However, the CPN(M) was engaged in much more than a nostalgic exercise in old-school Asian Communism. Prachanda was a veteran, a full-time communist since 1979 and an undercover leader since the Nepalese police came after him in 1981. Bhattarai apparently possesses a first-class mind and a record of high academic achievements in Nepal and at Jawaharlal Nehru University in India. Leftist circles in Nepal delightedly retail the story that Bhattarai defeated the former chess world champion Max Euwe during a demonstration match in Kathmandu with "a brilliant queen sacrifice," and Euwe exclaimed, "Alekhine [Euwe's greatest adversary] is alive in Nepal!" Bhattarai himself reputedly stated that "chess is to communism like water is to ducks."

The leadership had closely studied the few successes and many failures of Third World communist movements in the last decades of the twentieth century. While condemning the current Chinese government as "revisionist," the CPN(M)'s advertised enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution – the red line that separates traditional communists from modern advocates of the continued correctness and relevance of the communist line in the unfavorable post-1989 environment – appears tempered by the awareness that the Chinese terror that supposedly watered the tree of socialism with the blood of refractory bureaucrats was itself a top-down, bureaucratic exercise, organized by Mao and his faction.

In an interview, Bhattarai recognized, albeit with a rather dismissive "we'll work on that later" shrug, that true bottom-up revolutionary intensity might have to be sustained by some kind of multiparty democratic ferment:

"… We have to create certain mechanisms whereby the constant mobilizing of the masses and the constant vigilance and intervention of the masses is ensured, so the state doesn't turn into a bureaucratic state. To create such an institution one of the ideas is to provide democracy as was practiced during the Paris Commune days, or to again go toward the Soviet model of democracy, or draw lessons from the Cultural Revolution. We want to take lessons from all these three experiences…

The Nepalese Maoists participated in a number of international communist forums, including the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organization of South Asia and the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, formed in London under the aegis of American Maoist Bob Avakian. But the most useful lessons were probably extracted from the failure of the Peruvian Maoists, known as the "Shining Path."

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The rural program of the Nepalese Maoists resembled that of Shining Path (and, for that matter, that of the Taliban) to a large degree. Territory was claimed, courts were set up, and bloody assaults conducted on police posts and infrastructure targets by the Maoists' "People's Liberation Army (PLA)."

The Nepalese Maoists were acutely aware of the problem of the urban endgame that had baffled Shining Path, and realized that the solution lay in co-opting the democratic process. To avoid alienating urban elites with the specter of a jacquerie, it always framed its recourse to insurgency in terms of popular democratic grievances that the current political regime was unable or unwilling to satisfy.

The Maoists benefited from several features of the Nepalese political climate.

First, the democratic parties had also engaged in insurrectionary behavior in the early postwar years to put pressure on the monarchy. The Nepalese Maoists' actions were different in degree but not in kind.

Secondly, the Maoists' campaign was viewed domestically in the context of the absurdity of the anachronistic monarchy and the ineffectualness of the democratic parties trying to work within that system. The CPN(M) could emphasize its role as the principled opposition to the discredited monarchy, not as subverter of Nepal's nascent democracy.

Finally, popular dissatisfaction with the monarchy translated into an unwillingness to accept the deployment of the Royal Nepalese Army in an internal security role.

By 2005, the monarchy and the democratic parties threw in the towel and were ready to negotiate some kind of ceasefire with the Maoists. At this point, a major debate occurred within the CPN(M). Clearly, the road was open for the Maoists to enter the government – and the cities – and become an acknowledged and entrenched national force. The Maoists' leader, Prachanda, was ready to enter into negotiations with the monarchy to enter the government.

He was opposed by Bhattarai, who insisted on a posture of democratic revolution: that the CPN(M) ally with the democratic parties and demand the end of the monarchy and the election of a Constituent Assembly, charged with drafting a new constitution. Reportedly, Prachanda expelled Bhattarai from the party for his dissent.

However, Bhattarai was vindicated when Nepal's unpopular King Gyanendra suspended the government before the negotiations concluded and announced direct rule, eliciting a firestorm of popular opposition and throwing the democratic parties into the anti-monarchical camp. Allegedly, India then midwived an alliance of the Maoists and the democratic parties that toppled the king. The Maoists signed a peace agreement and agreed to contest the April 2008 elections for the Constituent Assembly – which would act as the parliament for ongoing governance as well as for drafting a new constitution.

The Maoists racked up big numbers (30 per cent of the vote and 229 of the 601 seats) and emerged as the biggest party in the assembly. They were able to form the government, and Prachanda became prime minister. Bhattarai became minister of finance.

This development was apparently as big a surprise to the Maoists as to everyone else. India and the United States were predictably appalled, and New Delhi reportedly embarked on a program of nonstop diplomatic and financial maneuvering, intended to remove the Maoists from power.

Prachanda had been in office less than a year when he confronted the army chief of staff, Rookmangud Katawal, over Katawal's stepped-up recruitment of new soldiers and his resistance to integrating PLA members into the army.

Prachandal removed Katawal; the president of Nepal restored Katawal to his post the same day; and Prachandal and the CPN(M) quit the government and went into opposition.

The CPN(M) has carefully positioned itself as the party of principled opposition to the monarchy, and is recognized as the force that brought it down. Today, it is promoting itself as the protector of the constitution-drafting process. It possesses sufficient political and moral authority to plausibly assert its status as expression of the popular will not only in opposition, but even as leader of an insurrection.

At the end of October 2009, Prachanda exploited the government's discomfiture by announcing a three-stage program of escalating pressure on the regime. The first two stages have already concluded with the temporary blockade of the government secretariat; the third began November 20.

During recent the demonstrations, the Maoists threatened to start instituting this system in the areas under their control, bringing the authority and, perhaps, even the survival of the current Nepalese state into question.

The Nepalese Maoists are well aware of the primary political threat to their survival: domestic unrest fueled by their numerous enemies that justifies armed intervention on behalf of the democratic parties and business interests (or, as the CPN(M) terms them, the bourgeois democratic and capitalist forces) by India.

So, they are prepared to walk a tactical and strategic tightrope, for years if necessary, to co-opt their opponents and encourage China to maintain the informal but explicit security guarantees it has provided to Nepal since the monarchy fell.

**CP**

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# "True Muslims": The Trouble with Infallibility

## By Niranjan Ramakrishnan

I recall a time, not too long ago, when any criticism of wrongs in the Soviet Union would be answered not by a shrug saying the place wasn't perfect, but by a long hectoring on how the USSR did not represent true Communism. And China and Eastern Europe? Neither did they. They had not followed the doctrinaire Marxist revolution – so! The point being that Marxism was a perfect theory and could not be possibly be wrong – it was all these examples which had failed.

Is this true of Islam? For each terrorist act committed by Muslims, many Muslim leaders feel impelled to declare that the perpetrators were not true Muslims. They seem to be not in the least self-conscious about how utterly simplistic, if not outright fatuous, this answer sounds. After 9/11, many would take the trouble of pointing out that the word Islam means peace. If one is a true Muslim (or Hindu, or Christian, or Sikh, or Jew, put "true" before your favorite religion) only when adhering to high standards of conduct, one can safely conclude that there are very few true followers of any faith much of the time.

To be sure, hypocrisy is not the exclusive preserve of any single group. But the Muslim world would do well to examine what causes large numbers of Muslims to quote and interpret the teachings of their faith so frequently in sustaining and justifying violent action. The glib answer, that it is in response to Israeli, or Serbian or American violence, is no longer enough. It may be that all these countries have provoked violence. But the question is not, Why a violent response? Instead, it is, Why a response couched in terms of Islam?

And, then, there is the other retort – often aired after 9/11 and resurrected after the Ft. Hood massacre – that the 19 hijackers are no more representative of Islam than Timothy McVeigh was of Christianity. That statement is absurd on many counts, not least because nowhere did McVeigh say he had performed his act as his Christian duty. Public opinion has a shrewd way of absorbing the evidence available and concluding what is an aberration and what is not. With large numbers of people willing to believe there is something beyond a mere deviancy at work, Islam's spokesmen (there are few spokeswomen – and that may be part of the problem) have a daunting communication challenge, to say the least.

Muslim organizations in Kashmir have often issued deadlines warning Muslim women not to step out in public without the veil, failing which – and they have made examples of a few women to show they mean business – they would mutilate their faces by throwing acid. These threats are issued in the name of Islam,

**If only Marx had written about the democracy of the proletariat instead of its dictatorship, the 20th century might have had an easier time of it.**

and have been supported, ironically, by a couple of Muslim women's organizations, among others. Are the members of all these organizations not true Muslims per the Islamic spokesmen? Where is the fatwa asking them to cease and desist from this atrocity? Or does terrorism occur only when Americans die?

The antidote to the delusion of infallibility is democracy. It claims no certitude, but in the long run, is the only self-correcting system. As the writer Rajinder Puri once said, if only Marx had written about the democracy of the proletariat instead of its dictatorship, the 20th century might have had an easier time of it.

Can Islam be democratized? Only upon the emergence of a strong human rights and free-speech movement in the Islamic world. There has to be a more convincing response to unfavorable publicity than today's all-season cry of, "Islam is in Danger." To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, every criticism of Muslims is not a criticism of Islam. No Islamic Voltaire has yet emerged to say, "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend with my life your right to say it." Instead, the Islamic sky seems to be rent with cries of blasphemy, apostasy, idolatry, and the rest.

Sorely needed instead are signs of a calm self-assurance. Islam has certainly had such days in its past. There is a famous report of a Christian traveler who, in Islam's heyday, ascending the tallest minaret in the Islamic world, loudly denounced Islam and praised Christianity without coming to any harm.

In a curious way, Hasan appears set to become the Christian traveler of our time, even if some analysts have expressed concern that his voice might be stifled. "Can the Major speak?" is the plaintive title one commentator gives to a recent piece, a play on an old paper from Cultural Studies. The writer need not have worried. It turns out that speaking is exactly what the Major has been doing, lots of it, stridently, and with breathtaking insouciance: how many of us could envision someone turning a professional medical presentation into an Islam for Beginners lecture – and keeping their jobs at the end of the day? It certainly lends new credibility to that old Army slogan: Be all you can be.

No prizes for guessing what would have become of the Christian traveler if, descending from the minaret after yelling his denunciations and praises, he had drawn a broadsword and proceeded to slay six Muslims. Would these same commentators have argued that the advent of Islam into formerly Christian lands, or, in particular, the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque had caused an unbearable mental trauma in the Christian's psyche, and that his actions could, thus, only be understood in a "proper" context?

As often is the case, Mahatma Gandhi put his finger on the nub of the matter. "The sword is yet too much in evidence among the Mussulmans. It must be sheathed if Islam is to be what it means – peace," he wrote in 1926.

Words to ponder, from a man who wrote the foreword to Allama Suhrawardy's *Sayings of Muhammad*, and was killed because his assassin believed he was pro-Muslim. **CP**

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the weight of conservative strains of Protestantism, even among non-evangelicals, not to mention neoconservative Catholicism: decent, responsible people should not consume drugs, and should not be allowed to consume them, because, if they do, they will become unproductive degenerates.

If supply is reduced, the official argument goes, prices will rise for consumers in the U.S.A., and demand will drop correspondingly. Nevertheless, Plan Colombia and related anti-drug initiatives in the Andes and Mexico have not reduced the supply of cocaine to the U.S., where prices have tended toward secular decline since the early 1980s and domestic demand has fluctuated from generation to generation. The volume of illicit drugs that U.S. citizens consume has not changed significantly over time, but the type of drugs they consume has, with cocaine coming back into fashion, together with pharmaceuticals, among young, affluent people during the Bush II period.

In terms of costs and benefits, fighting cocaine production and consumption is a disaster even by the standards of the Pentagon: according to a 1994 RAND Corporation study, to reduce cocaine consumption by 1 per cent in the U.S., it would be twenty-three times cheaper ($34 million) to spend on treatment and education for consumers than on coca eradication for producers ($783 million).

But the failure to achieve stated objectives has yet to affect policy-making, which is driven mainly by ideology. Empirical data have little bearing on the policy-making process. The logic driving the War on Drugs has been chiefly ideological and political, not economic: domestic politics in the U.S. have determined policy abroad. One of the defining policies of Cold War liberalism, President Johnson's War on Poverty – which had less than one-tenth of the lifespan of the War on Drugs – took for granted that federal and state governments should take responsibility for improving the plight of the poor in northern cities and represented a semi-coherent response to African-American riots and insurgencies. But what if poor black people in cities could be held responsible for their poverty? What if, as industrial jobs disappeared by the millions, they became addicted to selling or consuming illegal drugs, produced and/or distributed by U.S. government allies in Cold War counterinsurgent campaigns? Then African Americans could be locked up for nonviolent drug offenses and warehoused in prisons at an accelerated rate.

It is to Feiling's credit to have discovered this larger truth, albeit in bits and pieces: "As long as the focus stayed on drug sales and drug abuse, inner-city residents could be blamed for the poverty they had been driven into … what the politicians had to do was convince the American public that the inner cities deserved to be abandoned."

In the 1970s, President Richard Nixon and Governor Nelson Rockefeller in New York campaigned for office by whipping up hysteria about "crime" and "drugs," and then criminalized African-American communities, militarized policing, and increased incarceration. After a brief respite under Carter, fighting crime and drugs in urban African-American neighborhoods became the rhetorical coin of the political realm under Ronald Reagan. The idea was to put African Americans back in their place without Jim Crow segregation, and to get elected or re-elected by doing it. Fear was to be one of the most enduring weapons in the U.S. politician's arsenal. In his diary in 1969, Nixon's top aide, H.R. Haldeman, provided a succinct summary of the overall strategy: "Nixon emphasized that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes that, while not appearing to do so." In a letter to Dwight Eisenhower, Nixon wrote, "Ike, it's just amazing how much you can get done through fear. All I talk about in New Hampshire is crime and drugs, and everyone wants to vote for me – and they don't even have any black people up here." Nixon's War on Drugs,"Feiling notes, was "politically expedient, since it turned attention away from … Vietnam, while preserving the military culture that had inspired the war in the first place."

**Latin American countries have now joined the Netherlands in treating drug consumption as a public health problem rather than a police problem.**

Nearly all of those imprisoned in New York State for drug offenses have been African-American or Latino males, most of them from eight neighborhoods in New York City. Whereas the U.S. had 200,000 prisoners in the 1970s, it currently has 1.8 million in jail and 5 million on probation or parole, making it the largest carceral state-society in world history. The U.S. accounts for 5 per cent of the world's population and 25 per cent of its prison population; 500,000 people are serving time for nonviolent drug offenses.

Needless to say, the profile of the U.S. prison population does not reflect consumption patterns: whites consume an estimated 80 per cent of cocaine in the U.S.A., while African Americans consume 13 per cent; whites consume cocaine in disproportionate numbers, while blacks do not. Yet 38 per cent of those arrested and 59 per cent of those convicted for drug offenses have been African Americans. And stereotypes notwithstanding, whites account for 46 per cent of all crack use, while African Americans consume 36 per cent and Latinos 11 per cent. That is to say that although African Americans use crack out of proportion to their numbers, probably because it is the least expensive of illicit drugs, they consume considerably less of it than whites do.

Just as Jim Crow succeeded slavery at the end of the 19th century after Reconstruction was reversed, militarized policing and prisons replaced Jim Crow after the civil rights movement was rolled back. Black freedom struggles determined the limits of U.S. democracy from the early 19th century through the 1960s, and the criminalization and incarceration of young African-American males through the War on Drugs at the end of the 20th century represented another dramatic constriction of democratic politics in the U.S., first under President Nixon and accelerating under Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton. As Feiling and others have stressed, it was through sentencing laws on crack vs. powder cocaine which passed in 1986 under Ronald Reagan – in cooperation with Democratic house majority leader Tip O'Neill – and a revolution in police tactics and organization, that this was



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achieved.

Such is the domestic context, without which it is impossible to make sense of U.S. foreign policy in producer countries in the Andes (Colombia, Peru and Bolivia) and transport countries in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean (leaving aside Brazil, whose government does not respond to U.S. pressures). After Ronald Reagan was elected, aerial fumigation was undertaken against marijuana growers in Mexico, Jamaica and Colombia in the early 1980s, even as the Pacific Northwest became the leading supplier of the U.S. marijuana market thanks to its competitive advantage in transport costs; the region was soon to find itself subject to similar, if less toxic campaigns. In 1982, President Reagan became the first to appoint a high-level official, then Vice President George H.W. Bush, to run the South Florida Drug Task Force – composed of agents from the DEA, Customs, FBI, ATF, IRS, Army, and Navy – to deal with cocaine trafficking in Miami, by which time the city's homicide rate had made headlines thanks to the violence that Colombians had unleashed in their bid to take over and maintain distribution networks.

Before launching the invasion of Panama and the Gulf War, in 1989 President George H.W. Bush created the Office of National Drug Control Policy, led by "drug czar" William Bennett, militarized anti-narcotics policing in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, and doubled the anti-drug budget to $12 billion. Mexico had already become the major transshipment point for Colombian cocaine, but its dominance only increased with the end of U.S. counterinsurgency wars in Central America, the passage of NAFTA, and the fall of the two so-called cartels in Colombia – Medellín and Cali – under President Clinton. *The Candy Machine*'s greatest strength may be its presentation of perspectives from former gang members and drug users, drug traffickers and retired narcotics enforcement officials in the U.S. Thus Rusty, a former narcotics officer for the Department of Corrections in Arizona: "When I talk about legalizing drugs, people say, 'you can't mean heroin and crack, right?' But after 30 years of the drug war, spending a trillion dollars … the bad guys still control the price, purity, and quantity of every drug. Knowing that they control the drug trade, which drug are you going to leave under their control? Regulation and legalization is not a vote for or against any drug. It's not about solving our drug use problem. It's solely about getting some control back."

"They" refers to drug barons, many of them large landowners, as well as warlords, in Colombia, Mexico, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the problem with Rusty's analysis is that U.S. government allies in such countries – the intelligence services, the judicial systems, the military and police, business and political elites – are either complicit with or directly involved in supplying U.S. and European markets with cocaine and/or heroin, generally in order to finance counterinsurgency wars. As Cockburn and St. Clair's *Whiteout* [to be reissued, updated, in 2010 by CounterPunch Books] describes, this pattern was set in the 1950s, with opium and heroin in places like Burma, Marseilles and Cuba, repeated in the 1960s and '70s in Vietnam and Laos, and updated with Colombian cocaine in Central America and Central Asian heroin in the 1980s.

**"Oh, I'm selling cocaine now," I'd say. "Teach me how to sell cocaine," they'd say. So, my friends started to get involved, and, before long, we're making a lot of money, and I'm eating at McDonald's whenever I want to.**

The career path of "Freeway Rick" Ross in the 1980s, is illustrative. Unlike everyone else selling cocaine or crack, Rick Ross was supplied with cocaine at cut-rate prices by Danilo Blandon, a Nicaraguan employee of the CIA in the U.S. government's war against the revolutionary Sandinista government, as documented in *Whiteout* and the late Gary Webb's Pulitzer-prize winning *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Explosion* (2003). From prison, Ross explained to Feiling, "Me and Danilo Blandon were really tight. I knew from earlier that he was backing some war, and I knew that he was from Nicaragua, but I had no idea about the Contras. I was illiterate at that time, you know. I never read a newspaper or listened to the news. They say that Danilo was protected, and you can assume from the Feds that I was protected too, but I never knew that. I was just in it for the money, trying to get out of the ghetto."

Blandon sold cocaine to Ross at a price, of a quality, and in quantities that none of Ross's competitors could match. As former DEA agent Celerino Castillo III, who served in El Salvador, told Feiling, "They gave all the coke to Danilo Blandon, who was a CIA asset. He in turn fronted all that stuff to Ricky Ross. Ross became the Walmart of crack, distributing to the Bloods and Crips and everybody else all over the country… Hangars 4 and 5 at Ilopango airport in El Salvador were used as a trampoline for drugs coming in from Colombia and Costa Rica. Oliver North and a Cuban exile named Felix Rodríguez [a former CIA agent who supervised the execution of Che Guevara in Bolivia] were running one of them, and the other one was owned by the CIA.

All evidence pointed to Vice President George H.W. Bush's office as overseeing the operation, but, of course, nothing came of it besides the Kerry Committee Report of 1989, which charged the State Department with making payments to Nicaraguan Contras involved in the cocaine business.

In the neoliberal economy of the 1980s, anchored in financial services, insurance, real estate, and speculative asset bubbles, many African-American males and immigrant males of color saw the cocaine-crack business as the way to achieve material security. Cocaine gave a shot in the arm to street gangs, who handled lower levels of wholesale and retail distribution in the U.S. Rick Ross describes his trajectory: "I was a youngster. Uneducated, uninformed, unemployed. I was looking for opportunities. I wanted to be important in the world, somebody who was respected. Basically, I wanted the American dream, so I guess I was ripe for the picking. The opportunity came in the form of drugs and I latched onto it. I just kept saving my money and buying more drugs. My childhood friends would be walking, but I'd be driving a nice car, and they'd want to know how I got the car. 'Oh, I'm sell-



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ing cocaine now,' I'd say. 'Teach me how to sell cocaine,' they'd say. So my friends started to get involved, and, before long, we're making a lot of money, and I'm eating at McDonald's whenever I want to. At our height, some days a million dollars would come through our hands in a single day. Next thing I know, the whole neighborhood is selling, people were already gang-banging, but now we were able to afford more expensive weapons, more expensive cars, and better houses and the police started noticing it more."

The comment about eating at McDonald's speaks volumes about the depths of poverty from which Rick Ross escaped, only to wind up living most of his life in a prison cell. Indeed, for most of those serving hard time for nonviolent drug offenses, the crack business offered much less distance from poverty than it had for Ross. Marc, from South Jamaica neighborhood in the borough of Queens, N.Y. – currently the epicenter of the foreclosure crisis in New York City's black and brown neighborhoods – described his work as follows: "It was the hardest job I ever had. It's pure capitalism, you know. Say, you're selling drugs in the South Bronx, say at 138th and 3rd Avenue, and another crew of guys is selling the same drugs as you two blocks away. The block they're on is making $2,000 per day, and the block you're on is making about $2,000 per day. They decide, 'You know what? You're a punk. You're a pussy.' So they move you." It's dog eat dog, to quote the title of a remarkable 2008 film about the cocaine business in Cali, Colombia: a Hobbesian capitalist world of all against all and murder for hire.

This pattern – with gangs as cell forms of organized crime – was repeated among a host of new immigrant groups in the U.S., involved in cocaine distribution and/or smuggling and money-laundering: Colombians, Mexicans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans in L.A.; Colombians, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago; Colombians, Jamaicans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Albanians, and Russians in New York. These gangs, of course, are bi- and transnational, just like the cocaine commodity circuit, in which they are embedded: in L.A., there are roughly 2,000 gangs; in Medellín, Colombia, there were reportedly 6,300 gangs in 2003; Chicago is said to have 70,000 gang members.

Gangs involved in distribution aim to reproduce the corporate organization of capitalism, from which their members have been excluded. Hip-hop music testifies to this, particularly the Brooklyn variety pioneered by Biggie Smalls and Jay-Z. Lance, a cocaine wholesaler from South Jamaica, Queens, described his outfit as follows: "The structure of the business is like a Fortune 500. We'd have different titles, but it all basically remains the same as in corporate America. You have your CEO, your supervisor, your treasurer. You might be the captain; you have your lieutenants, your soldiers." Most Fortune 500 companies have different titles for their executives, though;

**In Los Angeles, there are roughly 2,000 gangs; in Medellín, Colombia, there were reportedly 6,300 gangs in 2003; Chicago is said to have 70,000 gang members.**

only the Sicilian mafia uses such terms for its employees. This would seem to be an indication of the extent to which poor African Americans – not to speak of Jamaicans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Colombians, Salvadorans, and so forth – have seized upon mafia organization and ideology to justify the pursuit of employment, upward mobility, material abundance, and, most importantly, "respect." If so, it provides evidence of delusion, desperation, or some combination thereof, for, as anthropologist Phillipe Bourgeois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (1995) shows, the cocaine-crack business is much like any other low-wage service industry offering no benefits. Feiling found that "street-level sellers earn roughly the federal minimum wage, which at the time of writing stood at $6.55 per hour." Most top dealers have day jobs and take no more than 25 per cent of total revenues. Only one in six brings home more than $5,000 per month, as 60 per cent of revenues go to wholesalers and retailers on the lower rungs of the distribution chain.

Yet, in spite of the new mafia ideology encapsulated in Jay-Z's (typically self-glorifying) verse, "even righteous minds go through this" (when contemplating whether to participate in the crack game), the cocaine business offers only marginally more room for upward mobility than the service industries to which African-American and Latino youth are confined in the licit economy – with the added risk, or near-certainty, of prison or violent death at an early age.

For direct producers of tropical agricultural commodities like coffee, neoliberal policies in the countryside – nowhere else applied with greater blood and zealotry than in Colombia – have accelerated a long-term secular price decline: there are no options other than coca for people in isolated rural frontier areas, where there is no state presence or source of employment. A coca grower from the department of Sucre (Monterrey municipality) does the arithmetic: "Getting a sack of potatoes to market will cost a farmer between 3,000 and 5,000 pesos, and it will sell for between 10,000 and 12,000 pesos, depending on demand. Meanwhile, coca is a lot easier to sow and process, and doesn't need transporting because the traffickers come to the village to buy it. They pay 1,500,000 pesos for a kilo of coca paste." Making coca paste is and will remain the only option for survival for millions of impoverished peasant families on the Colombian agricultural frontier; the same is true for Peru and Bolivia. As the experience of the Bolivians Yungas with northern Argentina demonstrates, a legal market for coca dramatically reduces the amount of coca leaf produced for the cocaine business. Bolivian President Evo Morales, whose political base remains the coca growers' trade union federation in the Chapare that produced him, would like nothing better than to tour the world touting the medicinal benefits of the coca leaf and coca tea, and it is easy to imagine a successful "coca diplomacy" with leaders and consumers in the EU, the U.S., Australia and Japan. But, first, the U.N. Single Convention of 1961 would have to be revised so that companies and firms other than Coca Cola could use the leaf for industrial purposes. Until U.S. domestic politics changes, it will stand.

Perhaps in recognition of this fact, a number of Latin American countries have de-criminalized personal consumption of cocaine and marijuana.



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Colombia was the pioneer: in 1994, as head of the Constitutional Court, created in the Constitution of 1991, Judge Carlos Gaviria legalized the personal consumption of up to 20 grams of marijuana, and/or a gram of cocaine, because, he argued, drinkers were much more likely to commit violent crimes, and no one had suggested prohibition of alcohol consumption since the 1920s. Gaviria, who has since moved on to a political career in Colombia's turbulent electoral Left, said, "Legislators can proscribe certain forms of behavior toward others, but not how a person is behaving toward him or herself, as long as this doesn't interfere with the rights of others." Ecuador, Argentina and Mexico have since followed suit, which represents the extent to which Latin American countries have sought and attained greater autonomy from U.S. imperial control, as many of the anti-drug laws in Latin America were drafted under U.S. diplomatic pressure. Latin American countries have now joined the Netherlands in treating drug consumption as a public health problem rather than a police problem.

In the U.S., however, as Feiling points out, "legalization" is a "third-rail issue" for politicians, meaning that most will not mention it for fear of destroying their political careers. As President Obama's drug czar, Gil Kerlikowske, put it in July 2009, t"Legalization is not in my vocabulary nor is it in the president's." To understand why, it is helpful to ask who wins and who loses from legalization. The losers, not necessarily in order of importance, would include U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the DEA, U.S. Border Patrol, the FBI, the ATF, the IRS, state and local police forces, the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. armed forces, to name only some of the agencies whose budgets depend on the drug war for funding, as well as their counterparts in U.S. client states throughout the Americas; arms manufacturers like Sikorsky Helicopters; large pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer; suppliers of chemicals for fumigation like Monsanto; the banking sector as well as off-shore tax havens; the Republican Party; along with warlords, gangs and gangsters. The clearest winners would be consumers, direct producers, and societies that would be less militarized, less carceral, less moralizing, and would have stronger public health and education systems. But, as Jack Cole, who spent 26 years in policing narcotics in New Jersey and is now the executive director of Law Enforcement against Drug Prohibition, stressed to Feiling, "When you train your police to go to war, they've got to have an enemy." Cole considers the War on Drugs a "terrible metaphor" for "policing in a democratic society." Terrible, alas, but substitute "neoliberal" for "democratic," and it is nothing if not apt. Predictably, Obama and Kerlikowske have dropped the nomenclature, but the policies remain intact. **CP**

**Judge Carlos Gaviria legalized the personal consumption of up to 20 grams of marijuana, and/or a gram of cocaine.**

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